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Elementary, My Dear Sherlock

If your Mac isn't yet running Mac OS 8.5, you may decide Sherlock is reason enough to upgrade. While the earlier Find File utility looked only for files on your hard disk, Apple's new built-in sleuth adds Web searching to its repertoire of skills. Although Sherlock is a powerful tool right out of the box, additional clues have surfaced that can enhance your Internet searching abilities.

Three Tools in One — To call upon Sherlock, select Find from the Finder's File menu, or press Command-F. If you're not already familiar with the Sherlock window, you'll notice three tabs at the top that access Sherlock's three distinct functions. First, there's our old friend Find File, which locates files on your hard disk based on file name, size, creation date, or other criteria. The second tab is Find by Content, which searches the contents of files for words (once you've indexed the contents of your hard disk). This is great when you know there's a report on ocelots on your hard drive *somewhere* but you don't know what the file is called. The third tab – and the function we'll concentrate on for the remainder of this article – is labeled Search Internet.

The immediate benefit of using Sherlock to search Internet sites is that you can do it from your desktop: you don't need a Web browser open, although Sherlock launches your favorite browser when you decide to view the Web pages you find. The Search Internet window has two areas: a field for typing search words, and checkboxes for choosing the sites to search. By choosing more than one site, you can search several engines at once; Sherlock combines and displays the results from all your selections.

Plug-Ins — A big part of Sherlock's power is that it can use plug-ins, little add-ons that extend the range of sites it can search. If your favorite search engine isn't supported out of the box, download the appropriate plug-in and you'll be in business. When you install Mac OS 8.5, Sherlock knows how to search several search engines, including Excite, InfoSeek, AltaVista, Lycos and Apple's Web site. More sites are included in Mac OS 8.5.1.

<https://tidbits.com/getbits.acgi?tbart=05201>

Sherlock is more than another way to search the same old search engines, however. Hundreds of plug-ins are available that enable Sherlock to search reference guides, news sites, mailing lists, shopping sites, and just about any type of information searchable on the Web. You might use it to search Amazon.com and Barnes & Noble simultaneously to find the best price on a book or to search six news sites for information about the International Space Station. And of course, with the TidBITS plug-in you can search all nine years of TidBITS articles.

<https://tidbits.com/tb/TidBITS.src.hqx>

Finding plug-ins is easy. Start with the Sherlock Internet Search Archives, where you'll find nearly 300 plug-ins, neatly arranged into categories like commerce, financial, software, mailing lists, and travel. Another plug-in clearinghouse is The Sherlock Collection.

<http://www.apple-donuts.com/sherlocksearch/>

<http://moriarty.mit.edu/Sherlock/All.html>

Apple also offers a short list of Sherlock plug-ins. If those don't satiate you, still more plug-ins are available at Download.com (just search for "Sherlock plug-in").

<http://www.apple.com/sherlock/plugins.html>

<http://download.com/>

If you have your own Web site with a search engine (or no plug-in is available for your favorite search site), you can create your own plug-ins. You don't need to be a programmer: I can barely program my way out of a paper bag, yet I managed to create a plug-in in about an hour using Apple's guidelines.

<http://www.apple.com/sherlock/plugindev.html>

To install a plug-in, drop it onto your closed System Folder to have the Mac OS copy it to the Internet Search Sites folder for you. New plug-ins are usable the next time you launch Sherlock. Once you've installed a plug-in, you don't need to worry about updates – Sherlock periodically checks for newer versions of your plug-ins. If it finds a newer version, it asks you if you want to upgrade.

Searching — Although Sherlock must wait for search engines to return search results like any other Web browser, Sherlock displays those results quickly since it doesn't have to fuss with rendering an entire page. You save even more time when you use it to search multiple sites simultaneously because Sherlock provides a consistent interface. However, by insulating you from

the search engine, Sherlock may not give you access to advanced searching features at different sites.

Once you've selected the sites you wish to search, type your search phrase in the Words field. Apple claims that you can use natural language searches (typing, for example, "Where can I find a recipe for fudge brownies?") although how well this works depends on the search engines you're using. Natural language queries may confuse some search engines, and others may disallow certain characters or syntax. Even though it's boring, "fudge brownies recipe" might be a more effective query.

Press the Search button and Sherlock goes to work. In a moment, the search results window appear, displaying results as soon as they're returned by the selected search engines. Results are combined and sorted by relevance by default, so pages that are most likely to interest you float to the top of the list. Not all search engines supply relevancy information, however, so clicking the headers of the Name or Site columns re-sorts the list alphabetically or by Web site. Click the small sort triangle to reverse the list.

When you click an item that interests you, a short preview of that page appears in a pane below the results list. The preview may be quite descriptive, depending on the summary information provided by the search engine. Double-clicking a search result opens that item in your Web browser. If all the information you need is in the preview pane (for instance, the definition of a word from dictionary.com) you may not have to visit the Web page at all. In the upper-left corner of preview pane – possibly to the left of a banner ad – you also see an icon for the site that delivered the result: click that icon to view that site's search results in your Web browser.

Next to a banner ad? Yes. You might find it disconcerting, annoying, or downright offensive to see advertisements in an application that ships with Apple's system software. However, since most search engines make their money from ads, Sherlock provides the banner space to ensure that search sites' advertisers aren't completely bypassed. Otherwise, search engines might begin to ban Sherlock. [Neither Sherlock nor Apple control the content of these advertisements: they're supplied by the search engines, some of which accept advertising some users might find inappropriate or offensive. -Geoff]

Save that Search — You can save the selected engines and search words by choosing Save Search Criteria from the File menu. Later, you can reload a search by choosing Open Search Criteria from the File menu or double-clicking the criteria file from the Finder. Sherlock immediately performs the search you saved. Unfortunately, there's no way to save a list of engines without search words, and no way to load a list without doing the search automatically.

Search Sets, Sherlock's Missing Feature — After you've installed more than a few plug-ins, you'll

notice Sherlock's biggest missing feature: the capability to create sets of search sites. You might make one set for your preferred Web search engines, another for news sites, and another for online bookstores. Checking and unchecking many search engines when you want to do a different kind of search is a pain (though clicking the On column header in the Search pane brings the currently checked items to the top of the list, which can be helpful). The fact that you can't resize Sherlock's window adds to the clicking conundrum.

Although Apple should address some of these issues in future versions of Sherlock, a few utilities and patches can add efficiency to your searches. Tools such as Moriarty overcome the window resizing limitation by modifying one of Sherlock's window resources. Others add the capability to manage plug-in sets.

<http://members.aol.com/appleink98/moriarty.htm>

Thanks to their experience handling application sets in Conflict Catcher, it's no surprise that Casady & Greene has created a program that handles Sherlock plug-in sets. Sherlock Assistant acts as a shell for Sherlock: select a set from the Active Set pop-up menu (or click the checkboxes in the plug-in list), type in your search criteria, then hit the Search button. The criteria is passed off to Sherlock, including the plug-ins you specified. You can install new plug-ins by dragging them directly to Sherlock Assistant's window (they're copied to the Internet Search Sites folder in the background). Additionally, clicking a plug-in's name displays information about it in the right-hand pane of the Sherlock Assistant window; double-clicking a plug-in takes you to the Web server used by the plug-in, although that may not be the home page of the particular search engine or Web site. Sherlock Assistant is freeware, and a 263K download.

<http://www.conflictcatcher.com/ sherlockassistant/>

Similar to Sherlock Assistant, Imagina Software's shareware Holmes lets you specify sets and enter your search criteria before transferring the info to Sherlock itself. One helpful addition is a Holmes contextual menu plug-in, which gives you the option to highlight a word or phrase in any application, then Control-click and choose Search Internet from the contextual menu.

<http://www.imaginasw.com/Products/Holmes/ holmes.html>

If you're looking for something quick-and-dirty, the free SherlockSets application creates sets by moving unused plug-ins to a new folder, Internet Search Sites (Disabled). Running SherlockSets only enables and disables the plug-ins; pressing Return or clicking the Launch Sherlock button brings up Sherlock, where you see only the active plug-ins listed and enabled. Apple has also released a set of AppleScript scripts that manage sets of Sherlock plug-ins via Leonard Rosenthol's OSA Menu (which you can find on the Mac OS 8.5 CD-ROM).

<http://www.omniasc.es/freeware/SherlockSets.hqx>

<http://www.apple.com/applescript/sherlock_sets/>

Despite a few nagging problems, Sherlock is an elegant tool that can benefit both newbie Web surfers and long-time users. If you haven't tried it out yet, grab your magnifying glass and give Sherlock a close look.

[Kevin Savetz writes about Macs and the Internet for Computer Shopper and other magazines. An avid collector of vintage computers, Kevin is as likely to be playing with an Atari 800 or Timex-Sinclair as with his Mac.]

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